

## GUEST OPINION: Stopping the economic tsunami, 07-04-09

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A 29-year-old single mother from Dorchester is a year away from receiving her degree in clinical lab sciences. For the past two years, she has worked full-time at a hospital while attending school during evenings and weekends. In January, she is scheduled to move into full-time training (while still receiving salary and benefits from her employer) to complete her degree.

Last week, the Legislature moved to eliminate funding of the program which will block her goal of moving to a higher-skilled, better paying job. Urgent action is needed by the governor to reverse this penny-wise, pound-foolish maneuver which will throw 4,000 people out of training for a brighter economic future.

In the 2006 state Economic Stimulus Bill, policy makers made a commitment to our state's workforce and employers by creating the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund. The WCTF has been a critically important part of a successful workforce development system in Massachusetts that links employers with jobs to low-skilled job seekers and workers looking for a career path in growth fields. Instead of relying on the state budget, the WCTF works by setting aside funding for employers to train workers in high demand industries. The grant process for receiving trust fund grants was rigorous and competitive and requires a 30 percent match from a private employer, a community-based training organization or community college, and the local workforce investment board.

The WCTF was established because studies had shown that in 2006, more than 90,000 middle-skill jobs (requiring more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree) were available but going unfilled because there was a shortage of trained workers. Growing sectors like health care, biotech, bio-pharma, green tech, tourism and hospitality were struggling with high vacancy rates for jobs that pay decent wages and benefits.

Even today, in the midst of the recession, there are an estimated 54,600 still-vacant skilled jobs in Massachusetts. Of the more than 2,000 workers who have completed training through the WCTF, an impressive 70 percent have attained a skilled credential which will enable them to climb the wage and career ladders in their field. Twenty-three percent have received immediate wage increases or promotions. Just as lifetime earnings are substantially higher for college graduates compared to high school graduates, so will these credentials continue to add value and dollars to the careers of these workers.

It makes little sense that, at a time when the federal government is distributing billions of dollars to stimulate employment, the commonwealth is threatening a highly acclaimed, data-driven vehicle designed to do just that. According to Skillworks, an innovative consortium of public and private grantmakers working to support and increase workforce training in Massachusetts, the WCTF is highlighted around the country as a model for sector-based training programs which promote employer engagement and lead to higher paying jobs.

It is hard to imagine that our leaders would walk away from a commitment that creates and retains job opportunities for workers, as well as increases state income tax revenues, especially when no new revenue or appropriation is required. Legislators may be under the impression that federal stimulus funds can be used to fill the gap, but unfortunately, that is not the case.

In order for Massachusetts to put itself in the strongest post-recession position, and not jeopardize the growth of key industries, the governor should honor the commitment that both employers and employees have made to develop a strong, sustainable workforce development system here and veto the FY 2010 budget provisions which will terminate funding for thousands currently in training.

Doing so will benefit all of the commonwealth's citizens and ensure that our dedication to developing a skilled workforce is not a permanent casualty of this temporary crisis.

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